

Curriculum: Discussing Arpilleras

Overview

The following is based upon Marjorie Agosín’s article “Introduction,” which is reprinted here with permission from “Stitching Truth: Women’s Protest Art in Pinochet’s Chile.” The article serves as a short overview or introduction to the themes and topics that will be raised in the other readings included in the Facing History curriculum guide. The following are suggested questions to use in guiding students as they read through Agosín’s article.

1. According to Agosín, in what ways did people resist the Pinochet government? (p. ix-x)
2. What is an arpillera? (p. x)
3. How did the arpilleras help to get information about what was happening inside of Chile to people outside of the country? (p. x)
4. What did the arpilleras show? (p. x)
5. How does Agosín contrast the Latin American dictatorships with the women’s movements? (p. x)
6. How did the arpilleristas become more visible? (p. xi)
7. What was the background of many of the women who joined the arpilleristas? Had many of them been involved in politics previously? (p. xi)

INTRODUCTION

Majorie Agosin

*Luella La Mer Slaner Professor of Latin American Studies at Wellesley College,
an award-winning poet, and a human rights activist*

During the early years of the Chilean military dictatorship, the city of Santiago always seemed dark and silent. A curfew forced the people to return to their homes at night and remain inside until the

following day. I remember the days too. I remember the sunny squares of Santiago and how they became empty, just like its many gardens

where children once played and laughed. In the empty plaza, all one could hear was the wind from the Andes and the sound of heavy boots patrolling the streets. I often dreamt of a night without fear and without a curfew. My city, once open and filled with noises, was now still and somber.

The rule of General Augusto Pinochet plunged the country into a culture of terror and fear. It felt as if each person lived trapped in her or his own silence, as if the city were turning into one perpetual night of shadows.

While most of the population was living this internal exile, some Chileans created a different sort of life, one that was not shaped by the demands of Pinochet's government. Secretly, groups of intellectuals gathered in homes to talk about books that had been banned and

censored. The meetings lasted from the beginning of curfew until it was lifted the following day. There were also women's groups that formed literary workshops to resist succumbing to fear. They refused to

play active roles in a society that punished its artists, banning their books and burning them. Poetry, once so vibrant and alive, was written in

secret: it had become a dangerous activity. Yet people wrote on napkins, on shoeboxes, and poets recited subversive poems in public buses. Life was still possible in the surreal world of order and punishment that the generals had created.

Pía Barros, a remarkable writer and a friend of mine, created a series of workshops all around Santiago, encouraging women to gather in their houses to talk and write about the dreadful state of the nation. Churches also provided safe havens for this parallel existence. For me, these gatherings provided a powerful inner light that served to remind me of our humanity, of our ability to think and contest the everyday horrors of life in a dictatorship.

Chilean *arpilleras*—the apparently simple embroidered fabrics that narrate

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the darker, otherwise censored acts of the Pinochet regime—belong to this other life that existed in Chile. I had the chance to get to know some of the women who made them. Marginalized by poverty and sexism, they carried on tenaciously with their work during this dark era. They turned their sorrow into a unique art form that recounted, through hand-sewn images, their lives as mothers in search of their missing children, as civilians demanding truth and justice.

The arpilleras were created as a response to censorship, as a way to fight against the impunity enjoyed by government forces. They became an important vehicle for spreading the news about Chile's situation. These pieces of cloth traveled abroad: customs officials never suspected that these humble wall hangings had the power to transform those who touched them. The arpilleras made it to museums around the world, to the calendars of Amnesty International, to the homes of exiles, and to many others who cared deeply about Chile.

The women who started this arpillera movement began their journey in the places of fear—hospitals, morgues, and cemeteries. They told me how they would recognize one of their own: each carried a mark of pain. They would ask each other whether they were there for a vanished son or a husband and how many children had been taken, when they had disappeared. Violeta Morales, one of the founders of the movement, always said that she was able to recognize her own grief in the faces of others. And they recognized the shoes

worn out from walking the streets in search of their loved ones.

Their first conversations were heavy with the language of pain, but the exchanges quickly turned into a language of solidarity. Slowly, they began to think of ways of uniting in a collective project that would transcend their individual plights. Soon they gained the support of the Vicariate of Solidarity, a branch of the Catholic Church. This organization, under the direction of Cardinal Silva Henríquez, a noted human rights activist, was created to protect the country's victims.

The arpilleras are made with plain scraps of cloth; they are made with the fabrics of scarcity. From marginality, these beautiful tapestries emerge, describing through their embroidered images daily life under Pinochet. Many show the abduction of young people, torture, arbitrary detention, fear, even exile. In other words, the arpilleras are an artistic and historical record of human rights violations, a record virtually unthinkable at a time of suffocating censorship. As a counterpoint to the images of loss and absence, some chronicle the history of Chile before Pinochet. These are moving arpilleras set against a landscape of hope, where scenes of families sharing a convivial meal contrast with more sedate images of family gatherings haunted by an empty seat, the seat of the disappeared loved one who will never come home. If Latin American military dictatorships inspired terror by destroying lives, women's movements attempted to honor life, to celebrate life, to preserve—through quilts

and other domestic crafts—the memory of lives snatched away.

I also recall the arpillera at the center of which Violeta Morales placed an enormous dove; or the ones by Viviana Díaz, which always included a table with flowers and a seat ornamented with a question mark, the seat of absence. The arpilleras were capable of denouncing what was happening in Chile and of revealing the innermost thoughts of the women who embroidered them. Stitching a secret pocket onto a quilt, an embroiderer placed in it a handwritten message. Often

these notes spoke of a time when torture would cease and justice would

prevail. One can feel the anguish of the women who so desperately want to reach others with their story. The message is both a call for hope and an act of witnessing.

On many occasions, I visited the workshops where the *arpilleristas* gathered. As they stitched, they spoke. Sometimes they needed to stop their sewing because the cloth was wet with their tears. But mutual support and love allowed them to continue embroidering the stories of their children, those they had lost, and their country. The art of the arpillera combines the individual pain of each of these women with the collective pain of all Chileans.

The arpilleristas come from many different walks of life: Pinochet's violence was indiscriminate, crushing the human rights of rich and poor. Still, while I have

met professors and doctors who joined this movement, most members are from humble backgrounds—washerwomen, hotel workers, and cooks—and live in areas where there is no water or electricity.

I feel so moved by the generosity of their spirit, the solidarity that they extend to each other. I saw them feed off this spirit as they became more powerful and extended their actions to public activities, hunger strikes, and tying themselves to the gates of Congress. They became visible; they challenged fear in search of justice and

assumed a central role in Chile's human rights movement. The interesting thing

to note is that these women lacked any political background; they became experts through the specific experience of dealing with the disappearance of their relatives. From that moment on, the arpilleristas began to learn, eventually founding an inspiring and generous form of activism.

The art of embroidery has played a role in grassroots movements beyond Chile's borders. It had a very powerful influence in Peru, where women who had been victims of violence at the hands of the Shining Path also made arpilleras in order to tell their stories. And embroidery played an important role in Soweto, where women made quilts to denounce apartheid.

Everyone who owns an arpillera, as I do, is reminded every day of what happened in Chile, in other Latin American countries,

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in all of the countries where might makes right. We must always remember if we are to create a future free of hatred and violence. The arpilleristas have given us the texture of memory and truth.

Now the arpilleras are the light of Chile, the clear heart of the country. They are the legacy of dark times. They are the memory of a generation that disappeared. Nearly two decades after the end of the dictatorship, women in Santiago continue to make them, using the same appliqué techniques; their themes are often the same as those of 30 years ago. Many of today's arpilleras say NO to impunity, NO to amnesty for those who ordered and carried out the violence of the Pinochet era.

And some of their demands have been acknowledged. When Pinochet died during the summer of 2006, he did not receive the official recognition his supporters wanted. A socialist woman from the same party as Pinochet's predecessor, the former President Allende, is today the head of

the government; her father was murdered under Pinochet. She leads a country that is struggling to know itself, rethinking its own identity, and daring to dream once again.

I believe that the spirit of justice and fortitude created at the birth of the arpillera movement almost 30 years ago is still very much alive in today's Chile, where a woman who was once tortured and exiled rules the country with a sense of unity and a profound belief that in order to forge a decent future Chileans must remember their grim past. The art of the arpillera is both the past and the future in my country.

This year I returned to Chile in the fall, and each golden leaf reminded me of lives cut short. I tried to gather all the leaves in my hands, and I felt that Chile was also changing seasons, entering a time of dialogues and reflections, hope and reconciliation. I felt that I could finally truly return to a country that now dares to dream—and then I realized that I no longer feared the night.